

Wesley (Del.) College coach Christian Zwickert touches his son, Collin, as therapist Michelle Menzer works with Collin's leg.



Hope for Collin



Christian, Avery, Heather and Collin Zwickert

A coach's son aims to keep beating the odds

By Brian Logue
Photos by Kevin P. Tucker

As he's held by his therapist, 16-month old Collin Zwickert jabs his right arm towards a mobile hanging off the specialized wheelchair that sits in the middle of his family room. It seems insignificant, but Michelle Menzer, his physical therapist, praises his effort to fully extend his arm.

"These are small things, but for Collin, they're big," says his father, Christian Zwickert, the men's lacrosse coach at Wesley (Del.) College. "We look at the short term. We can't look to the future."

The future is anyone's guess. Collin was fully healthy until his delivery in October 2006. During delivery, he became stuck and suffered a severe brain injury.

He has since been diagnosed with spastic quadriplegic cerebral palsy, along with visual, hearing and swallowing difficulties.

"Doctors do a very good job of predicting a grim outcome," said Christian. "The positive throughout this is that Collin has proven all of the medical professionals wrong. He wasn't breathing and didn't have a heartbeat and they didn't think they'd be able to resuscitate him. After they did resuscitate him, they told us he'd probably only live

for an hour or two. Then they told us he wouldn't be able to see or hear."

Collin does see and he does hear, but nothing comes easy. There's a battery of doctors and specialists involved in his care. He receives an average of 30 in-home therapies each month and more than 10 daily medications. He can't eat on his own, so he's hooked up to feeding tube and he's constantly on a monitor that measures his heart rate and the oxygen level in his blood. His difficulty in swallowing requires frequent insertion of a tube to suction

his mouth and throat out so that he can breathe easier.

With a daughter, Avery, who will be 3 years old in April, Christian and his wife, Heather, have their hands full.

"I'm so proud of my wife — how she deals with the medical companies, the nursing companies," said Christian. "She's the one who sets up most of the doctor's appointments. She's practically a doctor. She's got a real gift for it."

"I have to be over-organized," said Heather. "Every Sunday night Christian and I have to sit down and figure out who's doing what. There's a lot of paperwork and phone calls. It's a full-time job just managing Collin's schedule."

Heather, who spent the first eight months of Collin's life staying at home, returned to her job as a probation officer with the state of Delaware last year. It's given her an outlet, which she thinks helps everyone.

"It leads to some crazy, hectic days, but I think it's good for Collin and it's good for me," said Heather. "It gives me the chance to concentrate on something else for a few hours. I was spending so much time online researching what we could do or try that I was becoming obsessive about it. That wasn't helping either one of us. I have more of a balance. Work has helped me prioritize things."

Coaching the lacrosse team at Wesley provides that outlet for Christian, but with it also comes the stress of coaching. The administration at Wesley has been tremendously supportive, but



Collin, who was given his last rites on the day of his birth, receives an average of more than 30 in-home therapies each month

In the first 16 months of his life, Collin underwent nearly 20 surgeries and medical procedures



the challenge of running a competitive program is very real. Now in his fifth year, Wesley has posted back-to-back 10-win seasons and last year reached the Pennsylvania Athletic Conference championship game. Now they move into the Capital Athletic Conference, home of national champion Salisbury.

“A lot of times, I’ll go to bed at 2 a.m. and will be up at 6 the next morning,” said Christian, who lives what he preaches to his team. “Play between the whistles. For us, that’s when we wake up in the morning until we go to bed at night.”

Two day nurses and three night nurses rotate shifts to help care for Collin. Between the nurses and therapists, the front door of their house sometimes looks like a revolving door.

Collin’s extensive care needs limit the number of people who can watch him. Heather and Christian still haven’t made it out to celebrate their fifth wedding anniversary from last October, in part because they already have to ask for help from people more than they’d like to.

“This has had an effect on everybody,” said Heather. “My parents, Donna and Terry, have to be around more than they used to be. My sister Dana. My Aunt Gina.

My mother-in-law Patricia. I don’t like having to ask all of these people to put their life on hold to help me.”

The help is also needed financially. Medicaid and insurance cover many costs, but there are still more needs. The family needs a handicapped accessible van so that Collin can be transported

in his new wheelchair. Money is needed for updates for the house, for therapies, medication, and equipment.

One place they didn’t have to ask for help was the lacrosse community. Jim Rogalski, an assistant at Rutgers, and Andrew Baxter, an assistant at Drexel,

helped coordinate a “Coaches for Collin” fundraiser that was held during the US Lacrosse National Convention. Nearly 100 people turned out for the event and numerous college coaches pledged their support when they heard of Collin’s story.

“It’s really hard to talk about it without getting choked up,” said Christian. “People from Germany, California, various Division I, II and III programs, high school, youth, officials...every facet of the sport. Ski and Bax made a huge commitment to our family to meet our needs.”

The financial needs continue, but that’s not at the forefront of Christian

and Heather’s minds. They’re focused on providing love to Collin.

“When he first came home it wasn’t obvious at all if he could see or hear,” said Heather. “We weren’t sure if he ‘got’ anything. Now he shows obvious preference to people. His biggest improvement seems to be participating in things. He makes it very obvious what he wants. He has different voices for hunger or being tired or pain.”

“When you come home from a long day and you jump right into taking care of him, you sometimes forget that he’s a baby boy that wants quality alone time,” said Christian.

That’s something that Heather realized early on. She understands the importance of therapy, and both parents work with Collin well beyond his scheduled sessions with professionals, but she also understands the importance of relaxing.

“He always has Fridays off where he’s just a kid and I’m just his mom,” she said.

It brings some feeling of normalcy to a situation that is far from normal. The Zwickerts don’t know how their son will develop. To a large extent it’s out of their hands. The only way to cope is to focus on each individual day and celebrate the milestones, small as they may be sometimes.

“I hope Collin gets the opportunity to do things to the best of his ability,” said Heather. “I try not to think about whether he’ll walk or talk. I want him to do what he can do and know that we helped him get there.” **LM**

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—Wesley coach Christian Zwickert, father of Collin

Lending Your Support

Tax-deductible donations to provide assistance for Collin can be sent to United Cerebral Palsy of Delaware, 700 A River Road, Wilmington, Del., 19809. Simply put “Collin Zwickert” into the memo line and the funds will be put directly into the account to help cover Collin’s medical needs.

A family Web site at www.babyjellybeans.com/web/do/site/home?ID=232234 provides information about Collin’s progress and also provides an outlet for PayPal donations.